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The Readers' Forum

Major's death shows intelligence flaws

To The Editor:

Let us begin by acknowledging that the death of Maj. Arthur Nicholson is tragic and regrettable. That he was shot by an East German sentry is appalling, a shocking reminder of the brutal nature of our Communist enemy. In the United States, we place Communist spies on trial; their "civil rights" guaranteed by our Constitution and by the congeries of civil libertarians that flock to their defense.

East of the Iron Curtain, our "spies" are accorded less-delicate treatment, and not long ago a Korean aircraft was sacrificed to the rigidity of the Communist system.

Inevitably, given the organization of our intelligence community, a military officer was going to be caught while

carrying out intelligence functions in a denied area. For uniformed military personnel to be engaged in hazardous covert activity, as Major Nicholson was said to have done, seems to me a perversion of the military's role in intelligence collection.

In 1947, when the National Security Act gave birth to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Department of Defense created a military counterpart — the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) — as an umbrella under which the separate services continued their traditional collection of order-of-battle and weapons intelligence. Collection of strategic intelligence and the conduct of all covert intelligence operations was reserved to the CIA. So, without further clarification of Major Nicholson's orders, it is difficult to comprehend under what license he was attempting to take photographs in East Germany.

One would think that a high-priority East German target could be photographed by satellite reconnaissance. If not, then the target might have merited a special covert operation conducted by the CIA. Instead, we have a "Looking Glass War" picture of a uniformed Army operative risking — and losing — his life in an activity that never should have been authorized by his superiors.

Had Major Nicholson been a CIA agent, his shooting would have provoked congressional outcries and demands for answers to the questions: "Who sent him into East Germany? And why?"

Major Nicholson is dead. His death was tragically unnecessary. But if the tragedy persuades the Pentagon to review its intelligence-operating procedures and tighten controls on DIA's not-so-covert collection activities, then perhaps there will be no further sacrifice of military lives behind the Iron Curtain. And Major Nicholson will not have died in vain.

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